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Personal Recovery and Public Advocacy: An Interview with William Cope Moyers

William L. White

Introduction

One of the most visible and effective recovery advocates in the United States in the past decade is William Cope Moyers. Through his roles at Hazelden and the Johnson Institute and through the power of his spoken and written words, William has exerted an enormous influence on the new recovery advocacy movement and U.S. attitudes and policies related to addiction and recovery. I had the opportunity in October 2012 to interview William about his life and work. Please join us in this engaging conversation.

Early Advocacy Work

Bill White: How and when did your role as a recovery advocate begin?

William Cope Moyers: I owe my opportunity to join Hazelden to Jane Nakken. She took a chance and hired me over many other candidates who were far more qualified than I for the position, which was advertised as a “public policy specialist.” She was in charge of Hazelden’s external relations, including lobbying and advocacy, and it was Jane who made me the offer. I think the fact that I was in recovery had something to do with it, but it wasn’t a requirement for the job, for obvious reasons. I think too that she was drawn to my journalism skills since the job did require the ability to communicate Hazelden’s key messages to external audiences. Certainly it didn’t hurt that I was an alum—I had been through treatment twice at Hazelden, in 1989 and 1991, relapsed both times, and finally gotten my act together and got sober in 1994. So I was an unimpeachable example of the power of addiction, the importance of treatment (more than once), and the truth that recovery is possible.

Bill White: What are your early recollections of your work in policy advocacy for Hazelden?

William Cope Moyers: Until I saw the classified newspaper ad for the job, I had never given any thought to working in the addiction field. But when I saw it, I thought, “Well of course, that’s exactly what I want to do!” Still, I had no clue what I was getting myself into when I started working there in February of ’96. My first day on the job was to fly to DC with Jane to lobby the parity bill that had been bouncing around Congress for several years, and I’ll never forget the moment when the plane was descending over the Potomac River, and I looked out the

window at that shining city and thought, “What the hell am I doing?” I had a steep learning curve, very steep. There’s more to lobbying and advocacy than just doing it. You’ve got to understand the issues, the pros and cons, the politics, the facts, and the nuances. Fortunately, Jane and Carol McDaid, who was Hazelden’s lobbyist at the time, were good teachers. And I was eager to learn, maybe too eager in the context of the reality of advocacy in this field. Jerry Spicer, who was Hazelden’s CEO at that time, told me to “go out and change public policy” and I said, “Sure, where’s the money?” But we didn’t have much money to do that. I figured we’d overcome that fact with masses of people willing to stand up and speak out, but I quickly discovered what others knew already: we didn’t have much of a visible, vocal constituency at that time.

Bill White: I have heard you say that a speech you gave before the Rotary Club in St. Paul was a turning point for you. What made that event so special?

William Cope Moyers: I had been invited, actually encouraged, by Ron Clark, who was the editorial page editor of my local newspaper, the St. Paul Pioneer Press, to give a speech at the weekly Rotary Club meeting downtown. I worked hard to craft this speech, with lots of impressive stats about the toll of addiction on society, the role of treatment, and the positive effects of recovery. I practiced the speech until I had it practically memorized. On that day, I vividly recall standing at the podium giving my talk in front of a lot of people who knew me and my family, and as I gave the speech, I noticed people were falling asleep or trying to sneak out the back door. I realized, “I’m losing them.” That’s when I decided, really on the spur of the moment, to trash my formal talk and speak from the heart. So I said, “I know about addiction because I am an alcoholic, a drug addict—in recovery because I got treatment. This is what one looks like.” People were stunned; the looks on their faces told it all. They’d never heard somebody at a Rotary meeting disclose such personal, intimate information. Certainly, they’d never seen an alcoholic or addict that didn’t match their perception. But there I was—all dressed up, a respected member of the community, a father, a taxpayer, and so on, saying, “I used to drink too much and take drugs, and now I don’t anymore and all of you benefit when somebody like me gets well.” It resonated. So much so that from that day forward, I realized that changing public policy and dissolving the stigma required storytelling from those of us who’ve been there and done that.

Bill White: You and your family made an important decision to go public with your addiction and recovery experience as part of the PBS series *Moyers on Addiction: Close to Home*. Was that a difficult decision for you and your family?

William Cope Moyers: It wasn’t nearly as difficult as people think. My relapse in 1994 after three years of sobriety shook my parents to their core. They had come to understand addiction because of my own story, but when I started using again, it tilted their axis towards a truth they had not understood before, that addiction isn’t curable, it is chronic yet treatable, the brain has a lot to do with what happens, the whole family is affected, the war on drugs is the wrong approach to this health issue, and so on, and it was my relapse that was the impetus for their decision to do this five-part series, to help explain all of these dynamics in a way that was as germane to Bill and Judith Moyers, journalists, as it was to Bill and Judith Moyers, parents of an addict. So we had to “come out,” if you will, because people needed to understand where the

Moyers were coming from. Ironically, in that entire five-and-a-half hour series, I am in about three minutes of it. But all the PR leading up to it, and afterwards, was about our story as a family and my story as an addict from a prominent, respected family. That surprised a lot of people. That's the point.

Bill White: What impact do you think the *Moyers on Addiction* series had on the rise of a new recovery advocacy movement in the U.S.?

William Cope Moyers: We all know what coincidence is, and it wasn't really a coincidence that the series came along at the exact moment that many leaders in the treatment and advocacy field were fighting an uphill battle to get addiction covered by insurance, just like mental illness had been finally covered a few years earlier in '96. There was this keen awareness that without advocates, a constituency of people in recovery, Congress and insurance companies would continue to discriminate against addicts and their families who needed and deserved help. The Moyers series on PBS was like a lightning bolt; it jumpstarted and galvanized this disparate group of advocates into action as a unified entity, even though it didn't have a collective name yet. A journalist like Bill Moyers gave legitimacy to this effort, not just because of his reputation as a pretty good journalist, but also as the father of an addict—me. Suddenly advocates, people like Stacia Murphy at NCADD, Paul Samuels at Legal Action Center, George Bloom at the Johnson Institute, had an ally, and it was the Moyers family. It didn't hurt either that I worked at Hazelden, which had been part of this effort for a long time already. Or that two members of Congress leading this fight, Sen. Paul Wellstone and Rep. Jim Ramstad, were from Hazelden's home state, Minnesota. It was the "perfect storm" of opportunity that came together and gained visibility and traction in the aftermath of the PBS series. Like I said, "coincidence."

The 2001 Recovery Summit

Bill White: Describe how the Alliance Project came into existence.

William Cope Moyers: What most people don't realize to this day is that the Alliance Project, which morphed into the national summit and eventually, Faces and Voices of Recovery, would never have happened without two key players.

First, Jeff Blodgett. I had known Jeff because our kids went to school together in St. Paul, and he had successfully managed Paul Wellstone's upset victory to become a senator, and then Wellstone's reelection in '06. Jeff had just come out of the Kennedy School of Public Affairs at Harvard and was looking for work, and we sat down for coffee, and it hit me that this was the guy who was perfect to run this advocacy entity that a lot of us—NCADD, Legal Action, Hazelden and a few other treatment facilities, the Johnson Institute—had been talking about. Even CSAT, Dr. Wes Clark, was part of this effort.

Second, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. In the aftermath of the *Moyers on Addiction* series, RWJF was keen to take this sudden national public awareness about addiction and recovery to the next level. In fact, RWJF had been a major sponsor of the series and the related community education component, which was huge. Jeff and I secured an hour of time with the president of RWJF, Dr. Steven Shroeder, and we went to Princeton and made a presentation about stigma and failed advocacy and policy around alcohol and other drugs. We made a pitch for funding this thing we called the Alliance Project, and RWJF made us \$500,000.

That funding was the lifeblood of this nascent endeavor. It paid the bills, including Jeff's modest salary, and gave us the resources necessary for Jeff to put together the grassroots advocacy campaign effort.

Bill White: What are your recollections of the planning for a national recovery summit?

William Cope Moyers: It was a lot of fun. Jeff did all the hard, meticulous work. I traveled the country pitching the idea and connecting dots because there were already a lot of small, modest advocacy entities doing what they could to chip away at the stigma in their locales, or mounting "Day on the Hill" events at state capitols, or forums in rural areas or large inner-cities. Jeff and I and a lot of other leaders simply rounded up all of these people and organizations under the umbrella of the Alliance Project, starting with our recovery summits in Minnesota.

Bill White: Looking back, what do you think was the historical significance of the 2001 Recovery Summit in St. Paul?

William Cope Moyers: Probably the single most important outcome was that we all came together, didn't fight over turf or view each other warily, agreed on a common agenda, and then went back to our respective communities to do our work knowing that none of us was alone anymore, that we were all part of a larger effort to change the terms of the debate about addiction for the sake of those who still suffered. I don't think that had ever happened before, especially because this effort was all about grassroots, not top-heavy with a national organization that did not represent what was already happening down in the trenches back "home."

Bill White: Shortly after the Summit, you helped close the Johnson Institute and returned to Hazelden. Could you describe this transition?

William Cope Moyers: In the course of this effort, I had decided to leave Hazelden in 2000 because I assumed my advocacy efforts fit better with what the Johnson Institute had been doing under George Bloom's leadership. In fact, he approached me to take over for him. But JI was financially brittle; I saw it as soon as I got there. So, after 18 months, I went back to Hazelden. JI still existed after I left, but it struggled before it finally dissolved several years later.

Bill White: During the years following the Summit, it seemed like you were on the road constantly promoting recovery advocacy. What are your strongest recollections from those travels?

William Cope Moyers: What I discovered when I went out on the road is that I'm not alone. What a thrilling, eye-opening experience, to tap into something much bigger than me and bigger than Hazelden even. Advocates and organizations making a difference down in the trenches of their own communities, people who care passionately about addicts and alcoholics and the families too. I happen to be a touch point for many of them, a catalyst who helps to energize what they're already doing. I was surprised by how much of this advocacy work was already happening before I arrived on the scene. But I am also surprised by how much stigma, misunderstanding, and lack of resources still exist when it comes to addiction and treatment and

recovery support. There are a lot of people working hard to help. But there are a lot more people who need help. I saw it all when I first started venturing forth. I still see it today.

Broken

Bill White: In 2006, your recovery story was conveyed to the world through your first book, *Broken*. How did that book come to be?

William Cope Moyers: The book was a long time in the making. In 1998, Amy Williams, a literary agent in New York, saw me on Larry King Live with my father promoting the PBS series. Unsolicited, she wrote me and said, “You should write a memoir.” That had never occurred to me. I told her, “What do I know, I’m sober all of four years and besides, my story isn’t done yet.” She persisted for years after that. But it was only in 2004, when Kathy Ketcham, who had written the *Spirituality of Imperfection* with Ernie Kurtz, sent me a letter imploring me to write a book with her on adolescents and addiction that I decided I could write a book. It hit me that perhaps she and I could collaborate on my book. Kathy was really good at helping me organize my thoughts. And she got me to “open a vein,” as she put it, and really get down into my feelings and then get them on paper. So, *Broken* is my story, but it was created through a collaboration with Kathy. It wouldn’t be the same book without her.

Bill White: Did *Broken* achieve what you hoped it would?

William Cope Moyers: Frankly, I’m not sure what I hoped to achieve with it, except to tell a story that could resonate with people. Of course, I wanted it to do well as a book, and it has. But the success caught me by surprise, and still does to this day. The sheer number of people who have found hope, healing, and help in my story is really remarkable. It is humbling to me personally and professionally. At treatment centers from Hazelden to the Salvation Army, I run into people who say *Broken* is the reason why they got help.

Bill White: The release of the book prompted many discussions about advocacy and anonymity. How did you handle this in the book and in people’s response to the book?

William Cope Moyers: I chose to break my anonymity in the book, but I really had no choice. I felt strongly that if I was going to write about the gritty details of my spiral into addiction, then I owed it to the reader to also write in detail about how it is that I recovered and still recover today. My recovery isn’t magic or willpower or simply taking a medication or just saying no. It is the 12 Steps, plain and simple, a program I have to work day-after-day to remain in “remission” from my illness. I took some hits from some old-timers. A few even predicted I would start drinking and drugging again. That’s okay; I understand their sentiment when it comes to anonymity. But most people didn’t really care one way or the other.

State of the Movement

Bill White: How would you characterize the major achievements of the recovery advocacy movement since the 2001 Recovery Summit?

William Cope Moyers: Two steps forward, one step back, three forward, two back—you know, progress but certainly not perfection. I'd say the passage of the parity bill in 2008 was a high-water mark for our movement. Getting addiction included in Obama's health care reform was another big score. And of course, Faces and Voices of Recovery is proof that an organized, sustainable recovery advocacy movement is not only possible, but viable and a reality today. When I see all the Recovery Month activities around the country now, I know that the movement is thriving in ways none of us could have predicted a decade ago. What continues to baffle me, however, is our failure to rally around a common set of denominators to describe what recovery really is. My real worry is that if we—and by we, I mean people in recovery, their families, treatment providers, professionals who work in the public and private sectors of our field—cannot define recovery from addiction, then another entity will define it for us, and it won't be good because it won't be accurate and inclusive.

Bill White: You have been one the country's most visible recovery advocates. Are there lessons you have learned about the value and risks of such visibility that you could share with other advocates?

William Cope Moyers: At a speech I was giving once, I was introduced as a “rock star for recovery.” I disdain that label, mostly because that's not what my work is about. I like to help people, not entertain them. Besides, there are plenty of other advocates who've been around a lot longer doing what I do, only they're wiser and more influential in effecting change in their communities. Still, I take my role seriously, which means I've always got to take my own recovery seriously too. My advocacy work for Hazelden is not my recovery. It is my own recovery that makes possible my professional advocacy efforts. So it comes down to priorities. I do the best I can to take care of myself first before I take care of my job or even the people who reach out to me asking for help.

Bill White: Are you seeing changes in attitudes toward addiction, treatment, and recovery today compared to when you first were presenting across the country?

William Cope Moyers: Yes and no. I think the general public has a much better understanding of addiction now than ever before. That's good. I sense a shift in the willingness of people to reach out and ask for help. That's good. But there is still so much stigma cloaking the truth about addiction and recovery that our nation's public policies haven't followed this change in public perception. The “War on Drugs” is proof that our politicians and the people who vote for them still view addiction through the lens of crime and punishment, not the health care issue it is.

Bill White: You've been very involved in the development and evolution of Minnesota Recovery Connection, the Twin City's recovery community organization. You've talked at their Advocacy Days in the state capitol and participated in their events. Can you tell us why you think these grass roots recovery community organizations and their activities are important to building a recovery movement?

William Cope Moyers: Change happens from the bottom up, not the top down. Recovery community organizations like Minnesota Recovery Connection exist in the trenches, at ground zero if you will, to connect people to the resources in their neighborhoods to help them get well

and stay well. Ditto the advocacy efforts of these RCOs; when we're building a movement that's all about change, the first changes we must make are among our friends, neighbors, and elected officials who live, work, and worship close to home.

Bill White: One of the things I admire about your presentations is that you leave audiences with action steps they can do after you leave. Could you describe some of those steps you offer?

William Cope Moyers: I call these the "Into Action" steps, and whenever I speak, I tell the audience it is up to them to do one of these things within 48 hours after I leave town:

- 1) If you are a person in recovery, share that with somebody who does not know it in your community.
- 2) If you are the family member of somebody who has struggled with addiction, share that with somebody who does not know it in your community.
- 3) If you are a professional who works in the field, start to talk about your successes, and share those successes with somebody in your community. Tell them why you make a difference in the lives of addicted people.
- 4) If you are a donor, volunteer, or board member of an organization that treats addiction, explain to somebody why you give your time, energy, and money to support treatment and recovery programs.

Bill White: I have heard you say that we need to be advocating for the next generation. Could you share with our readers what you mean by that?

William Cope Moyers: It is imperative that people in recovery, especially parents and grandparents, share their stories with their own children and grandchildren. Don't be afraid to tell them about your own use of substances, what happened, and what recovery is all about. Encourage young people to ask for help if they chose to use and developed a problem.

New Book

Bill White: You have a new book about to come out. Could you give us a preview of it?

William Cope Moyers: It's called, *Now What? An Insider's Guide to Addiction and Recovery*. It is neither profound nor deep. But it is practical, and written to read fast and take the person or the family from the problem to the solution. Hazelden is the publisher.

Bill White: William, thank you for sharing this time with us and for all you do for individuals and families seeking and in recovery.

William Cope Moyers: Bill, thanks for giving me this opportunity. You were an early mentor to me, and I've learned a lot by following your lead.

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